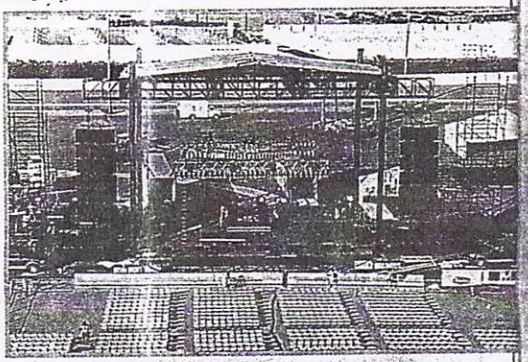
A-1 Audio Shows L.A. Is Key To Success

by Dan Daley

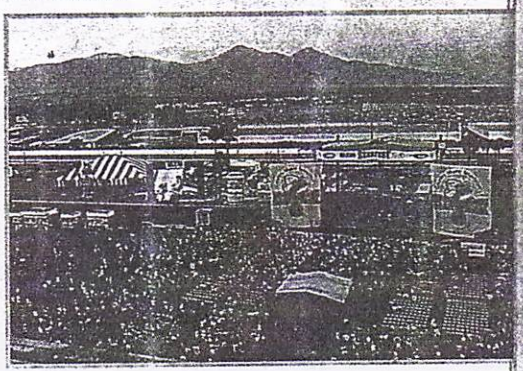
A-1 Audio Inc. has a disarmingly simple name, the type often found at the beginning of the local Yellow Pages.

A-1 Audio, however, is anything but simple. (The name actually derives from the industry term for the head audio person on a project.) Now 28 years old, A-1 is one of the longest-operating sound reinforcement/installation/development companies in the business. A-1 and its founder, engineer and systems designer Al Siniscal, started in the glory days of Las Vegas in the late 1960s. The Rat Pack was still running and Lake Tahoe was the hip retreat when Lost Wages got to be a little too much. In fact, Tahoe became A-1's third location, after it had branched out to Los Angeles in 1971.

Over the years, Siniscal (that name derives from the Middle English term for "keeper of the castle") and A-1 covered nearly every base in live sound, from showrooms in Vegas, Tahoe and Atlantic City to special events sound for film studios and music industry events; from Broadway shows such as *Grease*, *Starlight Express* (for which Siniscal helped design the sound), and *The Who's Tommy* to fixed sound installations and industrial multimedia work for arenas, stadiums and clubs. In 1992, A-1 bought the assets of live sound company Tasco U.S., a major player in the arena/heavy metal rock market. The acquisition gave A-1 an entrance into that market segment of live sound as well as four arena-size touring sound systems and three complete arena lighting rigs. It also necessitated the most recent of A-1's several expansions and relocations to larger quarters. The current headquarters for A-1's 50-person staff is a 23,000-square-foot facility with a 50-foot ceiling for prepping flying rigs before tours. In addition to Vegas, Tahoe and L.A., A-1 also has a new office in country music club-and-theater capital Branson, MO.



A-1 regularly does the annual Starfest in Pomona, CA. This year the festival attracted 35,000 fans, who heard their country music through EAW KF1000s, KF850s and SB850s.



But for all those nights with Ann-Margret in Vegas, Al Siniscal has a very warm spot in his heart and his twice-degreed mind for L.A. "Some people will tell you that it's a lot more expensive to operate out of Los Angeles than it is out of Pennsylvania," he says. "And, you know, they're right. That's why you see a lot of sound reinforcement companies in Texas and other places like that. But L.A. gives you certain advantages that you cannot get anywhere else. For starters, the film and television industries are focused out here, and that's been a big part of our success. Another thing about L.A. is that you have access to the most incredible pool of very qualified technicians and staff, people with experience in every aspect of the entertainment business, from touring sound to club sound to fixed installations. When you do as many things as this company does and want to do them all well, you need that kind of talent pool to draw from. That's what L.A. gives you."

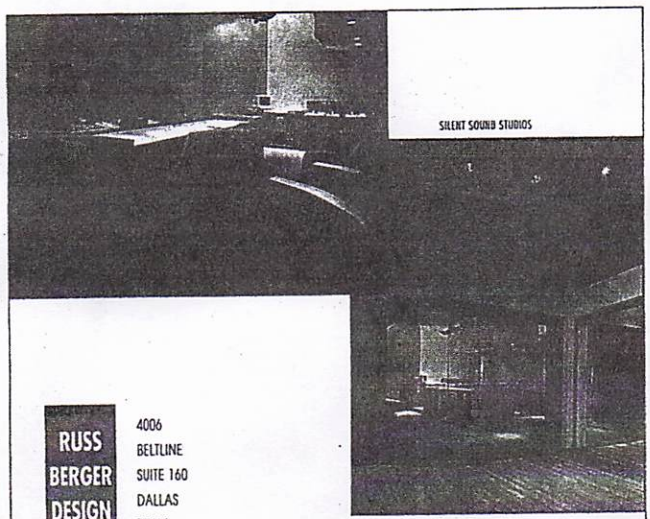
The Limits of Size

Siniscal needs that kind of talent and diversity in a market niche that he says has not been affected by the trend toward increasingly compact and affordable equipment seen in other areas of pro audio.

A-1 operates approximately $25 million in equipment and related items, with systems averaging between $500,000 and $1 million each, depending upon the tour requirements. Expenditures for the three major types of SR gear he uses—Meyer Sound, EAW and JBL/Harwell G-2—has always accounted for a sizable percentage of revenues, Siniscal says. A considerable investment has also gone into the increasing multitude of processors, such as BSS Audio Omnidrive speaker controllers, and developing proprietary technology, such as A-1's Vertically Integrated Power (VIP) horn-loaded/bass reflex cabinet design and the more recent DFM stage monitor. Even as segments of the recording market continue to move downmarket toward less expensive technology platforms, the SR business remains a highly capital-intensive niche of pro audio because of simple physics.

"The physical size of the components needed for a live touring system on an arena scale limits the level to which you can reduce the size and cost of a technology," Siniscal explains. "Because of that, I don't know to what extent the sound reinforcement market can participate in the larger trend that's going through the pro audio industry. On the other hand, SR can benefit from some of the breakthroughs. For instance, while we still have to have large, automated consoles for large-scale tours—we now own four Amek Recall consoles, and they're all out on the road—we're also using the new Yamaha ProMix 01 and O2R automated digital consoles. Those are small but very powerful consoles, and they provide you with a lot of cost-effectiveness. But that doesn't counterbalance the need for more expensive, larger FOH

loudspeaker suspension hardware
Accomplished Rigging
ATM
FLY-WARE™
21000 S. Wilmington Avenue ■ Carson ■ CA 90810 ■ USA
Tel 310.834.5914 Fax 310.834.3042
FOR MORE INFORMATION SEE DIRECT RESPONSE CARD



RUSS BERGER DESIGN GROUP INC
4006 BELTLINE SUITE 160 DALLAS TEXAS 75244
972/661-5222 FAX 972/934-3935
www.RBDG.com
• RECORDING AND BROADCAST FACILITY DESIGN AND PLANNING
• ARCHITECTURE/INTERIORS FOR ACOUSTICAL SPACES
• NOISE AND VIBRATION CONTROL
• ROOM ACOUSTICS AND SOUND ISOLATION

consoles, as well as the cost of large cabinets and trusses, and monitor systems that get bigger and more complex all the time. Plus, you have to make constant investments in both hardware and software for interfacing and integrating audio systems with control systems and lighting. Having MIDI-controlled event cues has become expected of major touring companies; you have to offer them to be in the business at this level. So the capital costs of large-scale sound reinforcement and installations are high, whether you're based in Los Angeles or not."

"You can spend a lot of time maximizing the quality of the gear," says A-1 founder and systems designer Al Siniscal, "but how well it performs will always depend on the people behind it. And since it all comes back to people, that really underscores how good a place L.A. is to be based."

Concerns regarding rates, however, are something that Siniscal and other tour sound operators share with their stationary colleagues. "We feel the same price pressures as recording studios do," he says. "There is some ability to increase rates as the level of technology acquisitions we make goes up. But there are the same pricing pressures in live sound that you find in any mature market segment, and in this case rates are determined almost solely on the amount of equipment that goes out, not on the cost of the technical talent we provide. So there's another way in which having a base in Los Angeles works for us—that deep talent pool allows us some flexibility in pricing when we need it and thus helps us balance out equipment costs versus rates."

Fixed Installations

Having a diversity of clients and capabilities is critical for large-scale survival in the current economic environment, Siniscal stresses, and L.A. offers that as well. A-1 regularly does the annual country Starfest in Pomona, CA, as well as numerous other regular and one-off theme shows in the region, including many celebrity charity events. Hollywood is noted for its blockbuster openings, and A-1 has a significant share of that market too. Finally, the recent and rapid growth of theme clubs has provided a growing niche within the fixed installation market. A-1 did the sound installation—design and install—for House of Blues' Sunset Strip location and for the first of the new Billboard Live cafes.

Fixed installations constitute a double-edged sword, Siniscal concedes. They provide a new source of revenue but can also cut into touring business. "Certainly, when a club has a great 'stacks-and-racks' [sound system and outboard processing] installation, touring artists will tend to use the in-house FOH console and the club's sound system, and that can eat into touring rentals a bit. On the other hand, a lot of acts have increasingly sophisticated preprogrammed cues and settings for their outboard equipment, and it's easier for the engineer to bring his own preprogrammed equipment in than to spend the time programming the club's equipment. And monitors are increasingly integral parts of what goes on onstage; they've become very personal, highly customized things, just like a band's amplifiers and drums. So acts will tend to want to bring their own monitors with them even into clubs that have good installed sound systems. So that balances it out somewhat."

But what Siniscal stresses most strongly is the level of expertise needed to stay at the top of this market. "The business is all about people—always was, always will be," he says. "You can spend a lot of time maximizing the quality of the gear, but how well it performs will always depend on the people behind it. I now have two full-time wireless microphone specialists on staff. You can easily have as many as 30 wireless systems running in a major Broadway musical production, so you need the people to make sure the equipment performs. And since it all comes back to people, that really underscores how good a place L.A. is to be based."

America's Fastest Growing Music Retailer
...for the third straight year!
— Source: Inc. Magazine Top 500
Sure, any dealer can sell you the latest MIDI instruments and recording equipment. Call them — they'll be glad to take your order (and your money). But only Sweetwater offers the kind of old-fashioned, personalized service you deserve from a sales staff that really knows their stuff. You also get dependable on-time shipping and technical support other dealers can only dream about, plus the industry's largest inventory in stock in our giant warehouse.
make the RIGHT CALL!
Sweetwater Sound first opened its doors in 1979. A whole lot of other music dealers have come and gone since then, but thanks to our innovative customer communications, affordable prices and friendly, knowledgeable sales engineers, we've grown at an astounding rate. We offer thousands of products from the best names in the industry, like Korg, Roland, Kurzweil, Alesis, Digidesign and Tascam, to name just a few. So if you're shopping for equipment, why not make the right call and find out why thousands of other musicians have made Sweetwater Sound their first choice for all their hardware and software needs?
You've seen our informative, full color ads for years. Now check us out on the Internet. It's the most comprehensive music site on the planet: "www.sweetwater.com"!
Over 100,000 musicians world-wide already get a copy of our exclusive Sweet Notes newsletter. Call us today to receive your free subscription!
(219) 432-8176
5335 BASS ROAD • FT. WAYNE, IN 46808 • FAX (219) 432-1758
sales@sweetwater.com http://www.sweetwater.com
CALL NOW! YOU MAY BE PRE-APPROVED FOR OUR LINE-OF-CREDIT ACCOUNT!
(Amount may vary up to $50,000 depending upon individual credit history)
THE ULTIMATE MUSIC RETAILER!
sweetwater sound inc.